SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

Three soliloquies on tobacco industry funding of university research

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Tobacco Control 2003;12:234–235

The view on tobacco industry funding for university research, from three very differing perspectives

Late at night these characters are each speaking alone, in confidence, to a spouse. [All characters are fictitious and do not represent any individuals, living or dead.]

THE ANTI-TOBACCO ADVOCATE

Our stance on tobacco funding is a kind of poison to the industry, and I relish that. I relish how the poison is spreading through the system. Universities, major journals, foundations have now agreed to isolate the tobacco industry from the community of legitimate industries. The tobacco companies cheat with their funded science, buy legitimacy, co-opt scientific research programmes. They have lost the right to be treated as acceptable funders of scientific research. Let the reputation of any institution or scientist be ruined by the few dollars they make from the most deadly consumer product in the world. Universities need to divest tobacco funded professors from their faculty as much as they need to divest tobacco stocks from their portfolios.

Physicians have come around. Blood money for medical research is transparently immoral. The arrogant, fact-for-fact's-sake scientists will find more and more that journals are shutting them out. For fact's-sake, indeed! These guys think their scientific method keeps them pure, but their separation from the real world makes them foolish and hurtful to the anti-smoking movement. If we eliminate industry funding and leave only the anti-tobacco funding, we foster scientific results that will be more anti-tobacco. This will be good—an undiluted good.

The companies say they are a "legal" business, but they should not be, they would not be if they were just beginning now. Advocacy is a strategic battle, and the cigarette industry deserves all that we can throw at them. (I don't trust the drug companies either, but I think the tobacco companies are several times more pernicious and evil than any pharmaceutical company.)

The industry has their pet scientists and we have ours. Scientists have become less important to the anti-tobacco movement. We know tobacco products are deadly. Science did establish that. We know tobacco products are addictive thanks to scientific research. We know about risks to non-smokers. But these were the big questions that justify most of our policies. The details are just details. For show, we need scientists on our committees, but, give me a committee of policy chairs from the voluntaries, and we will make more policy progress than if we have to wait for further research.

Look at the history. In the USA, "Reach for a Lucky Instead of a Sweet" was a clever slogan. It took decades to learn that cigarette smoking was killing. It took longer to find that lung cancer in women would be killing more woman than breast cancer. I can't get out of my mind the expanding tragedy of developing countries filled with new, seductive slogans and positive tobacco images. It is deeply cynical—despicable—to support companies that knowingly compete to get market share for their deadly products in developing countries around the world—while at the same time, being part of a system that allows these companies to give pennies to be treated as part of the community of science. The scientists who are worried about preserving their research funding should know that they become direct supporters of the evil empire.

It is right to stick it to the industry and to bring scientists in line. We have a tool for good that will help both to contain the industry and to shape science. We have the high ground in this, and we will keep it.

THE UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

When I started, my job was discovering new knowledge and publishing articles in prominent peer reviewed journals. I needed money to support my research—my research.

I know all research has biases. I know conflicts of interest can be found everywhere if you dig deep enough. Every kind of funding has some kind of strings. I know that.

Want government funding? Better be asking politically correct questions. Better be having politically correct collaborators. Better be reporting politically correct results.

Expect long, constrained applications. Expect long delays in feedback. Expect review committees with vested interests in pet perspectives. New ideas don't get far.

Manufacturers were a source. (To say "source" makes it sound like a drug "source".) The Feds didn't care much about nicotine research at first. But pharmaceutical manufacturers wanted to make the case that nicotine was addictive. The cigarette manufacturers were also a source of funding, often easy and with "no-strings-attached". (I know every possible kind of funding has strings attached to the future—adverse findings can cut strings to future funding.)

Then, smoking was engrained in the culture. We knew smoking was bad for you, but our questions were about basic science, not about health.

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PM3006501276

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/hnhj0001

Why do people smoke? How does smoking work to do what it does? People might look askance at industry funding but still they thought "sweet deal", "good for you". The industry wasn't then an evil empire, and we weren't evil by association. They were a self interested business, as were other businesses.

Now, the anti-smoking professionals have decided that industry funding is evil. Pure evil. The intent of funding, they say, is to buy a better image for the industry. This issue is misguided—petty. It cuts off our nose to spite their face—and to what but a token effect. I don't see my job as tarnishing the image of the industry. These efforts might stop all external industry funded research, and that might put a few scientists and scientists-in-training out of business, but it would have little effect on the industry image. If I discovered with industry funding something that improves smoking cessation, how much would that be worth to the public health effort? Would it not be more important than the small positive spin that the evil doers would get through funding university research?

I know better than to accept industry funding now. I would stop being invited to important committees and special projects. The activists would judge me a "collaborator" in all bad senses of the word.

The hybrid societies that attract activists as well as scientists will become unsatisfying to everyone. The scientists say, "Here is what I have discovered" and the activists say, "Yes, but the tobacco industry paid for it". As if that were an argument—a substantive, trumping argument, rather than a footnote. The key to science is not who paid, but whether a finding replicates. Journals are forced to censor research—without evaluation—because of its origins, not its intrinsic merits.

Who pays is the easiest target for preventing biased science, but far from the most important one. Half-assed, shallow, poorly conducted, poorly conceived research corrupts science and policy much more than does the funding source. But a simple moralistic policy cannot fix these problems.

THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY SCIENTIST/ ADMINISTRATOR

I have met with "anti" scientists, awkward and trepidatious in their blue blazers or cheap suits. They look down on me, but are polite. I am polite. They blame us for what happened 20 or 30 years ago, done by people we have never even met. They should get over it. We are one of the biggest, best connected businesses in the world.

We exchange some little information. We exchange business cards.

Cigarettes are a legal product that will send my kids to college and me to a well funded retirement. Cigarettes wouldn't be legal if the antis had their way. But the US Congress has had its way and understands that we are too important to the economy to be meddled with. Business, profits, GDPs, jobs. I am not ashamed of my profession or my employer. Addictions are everywhere in our lives . . .addictions to easy-chairs, food, TV, work.

The more their blue ribbon committees say we don't know, the more years of research we will need to have. I love it. Let the expert committees study and proclaim. We will keep releasing products to try to maintain or build our profitability. That Institute of Medicine report was a beauty. An agenda for years of toxicological and surveillance testing. We can tweak an old product and demand that the testing must begin again—in all fairness—on this new, improved product.

Do the antis believe pharmaceutical money is really less tainted than ours? The drug companies inflate drug prices. They create trivially "new" drug patents by small adjustments in formulations, so the public can have the opportunity to pay big money for fundamentally old drugs. And they have a powerful, television based marketing machine that has grandmothers eating dog food so they can afford their meds.

I go openly to scientific meetings and am shunned. They will actually get up from their seats and move away from me. I'd like to offer a loud, friendly greeting at a reception. "Hi, Bob, how have you been?" I'd linger on the handshake, put a second hand warmly on his extended hand.

Idea: Offer a $100 000 unrestricted grant to the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco to support their annual scientific meeting.

Idea: Fund arms length conferences on industry funding. So much fun.

Some say that taking tobacco money is like taking Nazi money. I don't know where our space programme would have been without Nazi science and Nazi scientists. Business is business. Naïveté is naïveté. Without the Food and Drug Administration compelling research from us as from the drug companies and with this funding ban, the outside scientist will be cut-off from empirical evidence. Left to blow hot air, like the rest of the antis.

I think of friends from graduate school who went the university route. Some got tenured jobs. Some didn't, and are on soft money positions, dependent on grants to keep their jobs. These poor bastards are addicted to research funding. And when the government won't fund you, be assured you would take industry money if it were the only way to pay the bills. It is easy for the antis to pontificate about funding—their jobs don't depend on research funding.

I feel sorry for the scientists on the outside. I do.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Kate Wagner, Richard O'Connor, Spring Cooper, and Beth Ann Quinio for assistance.

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